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## Mythologies: The Face of Orlan<sup>1</sup>

The Renaissance saw the body in quite different light than the Middle Ages [...].<sup>2</sup>

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the “naturalness” with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which in my view is hidden here.<sup>3</sup>

In liminality, boundaries are erased and redrawn. The subjectivities represented in the liminal personae embrace heterogeneity and contradiction. The subject

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted portions of this essay were published by Peter Lang in my book *Strategies of Resistance. Body, Identity and Western Culture* (Frankfurt, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Anette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 11.

in the liminal zone is the *dramatis persona* which wears multiple identities.<sup>4</sup>

*Dramatis persona* is Orlan, a French multi-media artist, who on 30 May 1990, in Newcastle, started the project which has entered the history of art under two major titles: the first title, "The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan" makes clear references to Judeo-Christian tradition, while the second one, "Images-New Images," refers, as Orlan explains, to gods and goddesses of Hinduism, changing their appearance to perform new deeds and start new works.<sup>5</sup> Operations-performances, accompanied by a series of lectures she delivers in between, have also received several meaningful subtitles: "Carnal Art," "Identity Change," "Rite of Passage," "This is My Body, This is My Software," "I Have Given My Body to Art," "Successful Operations," "Body Status" and "Identity-Alterity." The project has led some art critics (cf. Robert Ayers in *Body & Society* 2–3/1999) to call her one of the most important artists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The project has been designed as a series of facial surgeries gradually making her look like an ideal woman whose portrait she created. She says: "[a]t the beginning of this performance, I constructed my self-portrait by mixing, hybridising – with the help of computer – representations of goddesses from Greek mythology. I chose them not for the canons of beauty they are supposed to represent (seen from afar), but rather on account of the stories associated with them."<sup>6</sup> From the mythological images of Western femininity she chose Venus, Psyche, Diana, Europa and Mona Lisa. She explains: "[...] [a]fter having mixed my image with these other images I reworked the whole as any painter might, until a final portrait emerged and it was possible to come to a halt and to sign it."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Pitts, "Reclaiming the Female Body: Embodied Identity Work, Resistance and The Grotesque," *Body & Society*, No. 3 (1998), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Orlan, *Magazyn Sztuki*, No. 9 (1996), p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

The operations involved not only surgical refashioning of the features of the face but also the insertion of two implants which were used on Orlan's temples to create bumps. The operations are, as Orlan herself says, like rites of passage.<sup>8</sup> She transforms operating rooms into operating theatres with the surgeons and the patient herself wearing fancy clothes designed by leading designers. During each operation Orlan reads a text as long as possible, even though her face is being operated on: each operation has a leading text, which provides a philosophical, psychoanalytical or literary framework of the performance (writers read by Orlan include, among others, Eugenie Lemoin-Luccioni, Michel Serres, Antonin Artaud and Elisabeth Betuel).

Orlan's project is about representation and self-image in technological culture, although her final statement is about identity. She acts on two levels: on the level of corporeal substance and the lived body, when she questions the irreversibility of nature, and on the level of images, when she plays with the modes of representation of carnality in Christianity, in medical painting and in the media to show their inadequacy. On each of these levels she asks questions concerning her identity as a woman and as an individual: she explores the extent to which she is her own image and the relation of the change of the image and the change of the self.

Orlan invents an "I" that refuses to take its identity from its corporeal form. It is a resistant "I" – armed with technological achievements and scientific confidence, it has no fear to reject the principles that function as the foundations of social and religious stability and biological certainty. Orlan declares that her work "is a struggle against; the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, Nature, DNA (which is our direct rival as far as artists of representation), and God!"<sup>9</sup> In Orlan's artistic undertaking the body is no longer dependent on the natural world from which it has won its freedom – now it is flexible and intoxicated by the possibilities of change.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 37.

For Orlan, the contemporary body of an individual has become obsolete. She argues that “[i]t can no longer keep up with current developments. We mutate as fast as cockroaches, but we are cockroaches with computer memories, we drive cars and fly planes we have designed even though our bodies are not made for these speeds.”<sup>10</sup> The body, as we know it today – unchangeable, unquestionable and indisputable in its biological finishness, has been left behind by a rapidly progressing reality. Orlan declares the need of a new body which would challenge “the decisions of nature – this lottery of genes distributed by chance.”<sup>11</sup>

The body has become obsolete also in respect to an individual sense of identity since now the physicality can be reworked in line with the subject’s own determination and design, “in defiance of the ‘organic’ or god-given form of [...] appearance.”<sup>12</sup> Orlan explores the relation between the physical conditions of embodiment and the self; she also claims that now technological advancement makes it possible to bridge the gap between the identity and the carnal form, the gap which has become one of defining principles of human experience. She quotes Eugenie Lemoin-Luccioni, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, whose work *La Robe (The Dress)* inspired her to go “from text to act:”

The skin is deceptive [...] in life one only has one’s skin [...] there is an error in human relations because one is never what one has [...] I have the skin of angel but I am a jackal, the skin of a crocodile but I am a poodle, the skin of a black person bit I am white, the skin of a woman: I never have the skin of what I am. There is no exception to the rule because I am never what I have.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of the body as obsolete entails questions of agency and choice. To represent the body as obsolete and no longer adequate

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Goodall, “An Order of Pure Decision: Un-Natural Selection in the Work of Stelarc and Orlan,” *Body & Society*, No. 2–3 (1999), p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Orlan, *Magazyn Sztuki...*, pp. 33–34.

means to enter the realm of unlimited choice and unrestricted morality, leaving an individual on his own. Jane Goodall follows this line of thinking when she quotes Francis Ewald who has commented upon the consequences of advanced technology on an individual. Abandoned by the authority of God and Nature, we discover that we are what we have made of ourselves; that “our conduct has never been anything more than we have made it.”<sup>14</sup> In her work, Orlan takes this moment of realised abandonment under the magnifying glass of her art and tells us that we have a choice and that we do not have it at the same time. Advances in technology have rendered our bodies out-of-date – we have no choice but to accept it. Faced with the immediacy of this fact, we have a choice concerning the modes of modernising and adjusting our bodies to the requirements of the reality shaped by advanced technology on almost all levels of everyday experience.

The fact that it is her own face that Orlan chooses to work on explodes into a variety of meanings. The face has always been the bearer of symbolic values. Since Plato, who was the first to establish the foundations of the beauty mystique and the first to place physical beauty on the level of metaphysics, the beautiful face has come to connote Truth, Goodness and Knowledge. Although Aristotle rejected Plato’s conflation of beauty and goodness, he did define beauty not only in terms of order and symmetry, but also in terms of its divine origin. Regardless of the lack of unanimity among ancient philosophers, the beautiful face has come to be “semiotically linked to God, Love, the self and the soul.”<sup>15</sup> The belief in exteriority as the reflection of interiority was deeply rooted in the Renaissance thinking about the physical, finding its probably finest exposition in the words of Baldesear Castiglione who said: “Beauty is a sacred thing [...] [it] springs from God and is like a circle, the centre of which is goodness.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jane Goodall, “An Order of Pure Decision...,” p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Synott, *The Body Social. Symbolism, Self and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 87.

The objective character of beauty, its relatedness to goodness and God, has become a defining principle within European cultural history and has constructed dominating modes of perception of human appearance. The 20<sup>th</sup> century culture, and the popular culture in particular, has adjusted and trimmed the ancient belief in such a way as it would match the new social and cultural context determined by a consumptive character of post-industrial Western societies. The most symptomatic shift on the level of symbolic values associated with the beautiful face has not effaced the beauty mystique, but has redefined its signified: it is no longer divinity and spirituality – in the new context the face has become the commodity and the vehicle for the performing and marketable self.

The point is however, that the beautiful face is not Orlan's aim. The artist draws her own self-portrait and during the process she becomes one: now the one who is painted becomes responsible for every move of the brush/scalpel of the one who paints. Orlan becomes the Demiurg: she creates herself and represents herself. However, what should not be missed is the fact that if the face of Garbo is an Idea, while the face of Hepburn is an Event – at least this is what Barthes postulates in one of the essays in *Mythologies* – the face of Orlan becomes, in a very subversive manner, an Anti-Idea. The very concept of beauty is, for the audience and for Orlan herself, mercilessly deconstructed on the operating table which becomes Orlan's easel. In her project it is her own face that has become the stage on which she dissects culturally blessed processes of beautification to reveal ideological abuse and one of the most powerful paradoxes of modern time: in the Western tradition it was the self-portrait that mirrored an identity of the subject, manifested in his or her facial features. In modern times, the process has been reversed: an identity is manifested in the facial features reshaped in the course of plastic surgery.

To expose and popularise her face, Orlan appropriated the patterns of display compulsory in the world of visual culture in an ironically subversive manner: the seventh operation performed in 1993 was transmitted live by satellite to several galleries around the world. What we have witnessed is a medical and artistic form of reality

show which in this case emphasises the omnipresence of the idea of bodily transformations. The subversive difference, however, is that Orlan has made it central what popular culture has pushed to the margins and turned into the Invisible.

If Orlan's face is an anti-idea, what is the Idea then? To answer this question let us look at the schizophrenic status of the canonical body: the body that exists in the realm of mass culture and is the site of contemporary paradox. Plasticity as a post-modern paradigm, openness, constructedness on one hand; on the other hand restrictions, limitations, shame and guilt, orthodoxy. Choice vs. regime, polyphony of voices vs. speechlessness. The body created by mass culture and promoted by media uses one voice and is locked in the monotony and repetitiveness of its own history.

In the conditions of culture which appreciates the sense of sight most, the canonical body has been designed to be watched and not to feel: it exists for others and not for itself. The subjectivity of the one that is watched has been reduced to what the one who watches can see. The body shaped in this manner loses its uniqueness and individuality. Overrepresentation and omnipresence locks the body in the space of predictability in which an individual voice is not heard. Human physicality loses the power to emanate own meanings.

The canonical body is a closed body of denial. It is the body whose physical integrity is not disturbed; its orifices are tightly closed, the surfaces are smoothed and its physicality is efficiently controlled. This carefully controlled body denies ageing, death and mortality through the effacement of the interior, which always implies mortality; the flesh reminds us that we are mortal beings. "Our epoch hates flesh,"<sup>17</sup> Orlan reminds us.

Orlan's body belongs to the realm of resistance; in her project grotesque realism becomes a powerful tool of expression. The convention opens up Orlan's already opened body. The Bakhtinian dichotomy of an open and closed body, when transferred to the level of mass culture and resistance mass culture generates, allows for a meaningful parallel to emerge: the Bakhtinian opposition – me-

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<sup>17</sup> Orlan, *Magazyn Sztuki*..., p. 36.



dieval body vs. Renaissance body – corresponds to the opposition: canonical body vs. resistant or peripheral body. The juxtaposition of the representation of the surgically refashioned body, which has dominated the media, with the one which Orlan has (de)constructed reveals the diversion she introduces. Orlan opens the otherwise closed space aiming at two things: she releases the carnivalesque implicit in the opened body and uses it as a tool of a challenge – a contemporary representation of physicality is thus questioned.

Orlan's body viewed in this manner talks not only about itself – the essence of Orlan's transformation consists in the fact that it is both of individual and collective character. Her project is a record made on the skin – a record of individual transformation which is a form of liberation from the dictatorship of biological, social and cultural order. It is also a record of deconstruction of aesthetic norms and ways of its realisation promoted in the conditions of mass culture. We all take aesthetic norms but the ideological abuse, to use Barthes's phrase, is that Norm naturalises the body that is always constructed and reshaped. The very concept of "naturalness" has been radically redefined and Orlan's project aims at demystifying the processes that are behind this "naturalness."

Orlan's transformations take place in the theatre of the operating room. Once we enter it we realise we witness a performance. We see people wearing fancy clothes, we see Orlan holding black and white crosses, we see a bowl full of artificial fruits. The atmosphere is playful, ironic and auto-ironic. The artist herself says: "As a plastic artist I wanted to intervene in the cold and stereotyped image of plastic surgery, to alter it with other forms, to challenge it. I transformed the decor, the surgeons and my team were dressed in costumes by top designers, myself and young stylists (Paco Rabanne, Frank Sorbier, Issey Miyake, Lan Vu, an American stylist and his team)."<sup>18</sup> In this way Orlan plays with the ambiguity of the word "theatre" denoting a large room, usually with a raised platform and seats for an audience, used not only for artistic performances but also for surgical demonstrations. In Orlan's world the boundaries between

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

the two disappear and a patient and a surgeon become actors performing the illusion which is the reality.

In the space of the operation theatre human carnality is the main protagonist; it is the body that is open, collective and dialectic – Bakhtinian carnivalesque body. Orlan's operations are performed in the atmosphere of carnival but through deconstruction of principles of official culture they inscribe themselves in carnivalesque criticism. Bakhtin analyses the mechanism of the working of the grotesque and shows that it has power to destabilise the boundaries of human physicality. It deprives the carnal form of its stability and definiteness, entailing a state of transition and rendering human physicality ambiguous. The significance of such an approach consists in the fact that the transitional nature of the grotesque body makes identity equivocal, multiple and marginal.

In *Rabelais and His World* we read: "The artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surfaces of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths."<sup>19</sup> The grotesque body is an open body in the process of becoming. The grotesque implies liminality, which Victoria L. Pitts associates with liminal stages of rites of passage analysed by Victor Turner in *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndenbu Ritual* (1967). She claims that: "[l]iminality is the point of transition in ritual – the middle stage between young and old, unsocialised and socialised, pristine and marked."<sup>20</sup> The act of opening of the body violates not only its surface but also the former representation of human physicality in Western tradition.

The main idea of Orlan's project is that of becoming and not that of being; it is not the final product, i.e. a new face that matters, but the process of becoming a new social and physical individual. Her "products," material artefacts she creates, are unique and unrepeatable since they are the fragments of her body which she exhibits as reliquaries, the remnants of her former self.

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<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World...*, pp. 317–318.

<sup>20</sup> Pitts, "Reclaiming the Female Body...", p. 73.

Orlan speaks through degradation central to grotesque realism; Bakhtin believes that the essence of degradation is “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...] to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”<sup>21</sup> The official body of mass culture is the embodiment of the Ideal residing in the utopian world of perfection – it is the embodiment of the prevailing truth and the established order. Orlan’s degradation of the Ideal reveals regenerative potential of the process.

Orlan speaks through openings, through flesh, through the cuttings in her skin. The skin fascinates Orlan since it is not univocal. She has discovered its dual character and its essential contradiction; the skin belongs to the realm of biology and the Irrevocable but at the same time it may be used as a material and be redesigned. Jane Goodall notices this paradox when she says that the skin may be approached as an “expression of the irrational dictatorship of nature, yet also as a plastic medium just waiting for the artist to reveal its design possibilities.”<sup>22</sup> The skin of the obsolete body marks the boundaries which are not to be crossed, while the skin of the new, redesigned body opens and makes it possible to “bring the internal image close to the external image.”<sup>23</sup>

The skin embraces and limits; controls and orders – the essence of the skin consists in its potential to enclose and tightly separate the inside and the private from the outside and the public. The skin is a boundary between the space of flesh, mortality, ageing, decay, biology and the Irreversible and the space of the Ideal and promise, immortality and control – the body of resistance penetrates the inside and does not escape its own fleshy conditions. The skin that is cut open allows the world in; the inside is given to the world. The gesture of reciprocity performed in the space where no reciprocity is expected redefines the boundaries of human carnality and violates social and cultural taboos.

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<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*..., pp. 19–20.

<sup>22</sup> Goodall, “An Order of Pure Decision...,” p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> Orlan, *Magazyn Sztuki*..., p. 34.

Orlan enters the realm of carnival to plunge into the feast of “becoming, change and renewal.”<sup>24</sup> The ritual of the re-birth is performed in front of us to accentuate dialogic character of the performance. What we witness is the rite of passage; painful and bloody, it is a contemporary ceremony of transformation to which the omnipresent mass culture encourages and obliges an individual. In accord with the ritual sanctioned by this culture, the viewer witnesses the miraculous metamorphosis taking place behind the closed door. The viewer admires the effect of this transformation, but the private never becomes the public. Orlan opens the body, but it is not only her body that is opened: she also opens the door behind which the metamorphosis happens. The private becomes the public; the interior becomes the surface and the audience becomes the witness of the painful change. Orlan deconstructs her own identity defined by the social role and imposed upon her by nature and God.

What is also deconstructed by Orlan is the image of the surgically reconstructed body created by the media. The body of the media is an illusory body whose illusiveness has been turned into reality. The cultural process of “naturalisation” of otherwise meticulously and carefully produced quality resembles the processes revealed and analysed by Barthes in *Mythologies*. His previously mentioned impatience caused by apparent naturalness of images seems to be one of the key ideas in Orlan’s project. She deconstructs this “naturalness” to reveal the mechanisms of the production of a desirable body in the conditions of consumer culture.

Orlan’s work shows how the exposure and the release of the carnivalesque can become powerful tools of resistance. Her carnivalesque body operates on the level of grotesque which, through the use of the strange and the unnatural, causes fear, disbelief and sometimes amusement. Her body is transitional – neither it is her previous, “old” form nor it is her “new” one. She exposes herself “in between” – the consequence of such a representation is the consequent depiction of an identity as something equally transitory.

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<sup>24</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World...*, p. 10.

The subject is in permanent motion and negates oppressive, normative categories of identity thus subverting social regulations and cultural taboos. The grotesque, implying an act of trespassing beyond the frames and the norms and situating the subject outside, seems to be the key to discover one of the ideas uniting the succeeding scenes of Orlan's transformations.